



Crisis and Risk Communication Scholarship of the Future: Reflections on Research Gaps

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ABSTRACT

Risk and crisis communication is a vibrant and growing area of research and practice. As we head into the third year of publishing the first journal dedicated to crisis and risk communication, the editor and editorial assistant pose some especially promising areas for future research. In this essay, we also introduce the articles published in this journal, including how they meet promising research gaps to fill.

KEYWORDS: risk, crisis, communication, research gaps

Risk and crisis communication is a vibrant and growing area of research and practice. As we head into the third year of publishing the first journal dedicated to crisis and risk communication, we pose some especially promising areas for future research. The journal continues to accept all research related to risk and crisis communication, but we should think about how we can best advance theory and practice through generating valuable, new knowledge. As noted in the last editorial essay, reviewers for this journal often criticize manuscripts for not advancing new knowledge (Liu & Stanley, 2019). The purpose of this essay is to start a conversation about promising future research directions, rather than generate a definitive list of research gaps. As you read, consider what you think the future of risk and crisis communication

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scholarship should be and submit that work to the Journal. We conclude the essay with introducing the articles in this issue of the Journal.

More Public-Driven Research

We first pose that we need more public-driven risk and crisis communication research. From situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2019) to image repair discourse (Benoit, 2018) to typologies (Coombs, 2010; Lerbinger, 1997; Seeger et al., 2003), crisis and risk communication research has advanced in a manner that prioritized understanding how organizations should manage adverse events. The scholarship that emerged, while prominent and important, created an imbalance in understanding more about how organizations manage crises instead of how members of the public or communities manage crises.

Crises exist beyond the realm of corporations, governments, and nonprofits, affecting real people, properties, and livelihoods. Risks are integral to community members' daily routines with continued gun violence and climate change disasters, among other risks. Scholars should extend their research beyond issues of reputation and repair, and find solutions for publics (Liu & Fraustino, 2014). The field needs stakeholder perspectives, not just descriptions of the nature of crisis responses. By shifting to a public-driven approach, a plethora of significant questions emerge for the discipline to consider. For example, research has highly emphasized cognitive variables and responses. Therefore, poignantly, the role of emotion and affect in crisis and risk communication needs further exploration and confirmation (c.f., Jin et al., 2012). What is the relationship among emotions, risk perception, and, furthermore, the important information-seeking and protective-actions that the discipline strives to identify? As another example question for future research, how do publics communicate about crises independent of organizations? How does this public-to-public communication affect outcomes like protective-action taking?

Interpersonal Risk and Crisis Communication

The field additionally needs to supplement intrapersonal communication knowledge with a more robust understanding of

interpersonal communication in the case of risks and crises. Understanding who communicates to who, when, and with what messages has important implications. When it comes to risks and crises, communication is not limited to organization-to-public, but also includes public-to-public, as noted above. There is a need to understand what is being transmitted beyond the formal channels, at what frequency, and to what extent. This may be especially prominent in the era of social media where the plethora of online platforms and personas have an influential stake in the communication of (mis)information.

Current Challenges

A third notable research gap is scholarship that addresses current risk and crisis communication challenges. At the inaugural meeting of our editorial board in March 2019, members noted that it is important to publish research that advances practice, and not just theory. We have already published research in this journal on some of the most noteworthy risks and crises of our time, including the refugee crisis in Europe (Johansson, 2018), the Ebola pandemic (Dillard & Yang, 2019; Sellnow-Richmond et al., 2018), sexual misconduct on college campuses (Woods & Veil, 2020), and the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster (Kwesell & Jung, 2019). We call for more research on such contemporary crises, advancing theory and practice for 21st century risk and crisis communication challenges.

Inclusive Scholarship

Shifting to a public-driven perspective emphasizes the important question of who is being included versus excluded in studies. Crises affect publics differently, especially publics who already are vulnerable. Waymer and Heath (2007) explored this distinction in relation to Hurricane Katrina, but it must be an essential consideration for additional crisis and risk communication research. How are warning systems being used, updated, or critiqued on behalf of disabled communities or language learners? How are protective actions being communicated to immigrants and refugees? What do these communities witness, experience, and need when it comes to crises and risks? Ultimately, there is a promising need

for crisis and risk communication theories to be more encompassing and inclusive.

As scholarship considers a diversity of publics who face a variety of crises, the role of culture also becomes more prominent. Intercultural communication is a vital part of understanding crisis communication. Further developing the field may include using culture as a variable in new and established models as well as conducting cross-cultural studies. Diers-Lawson (2017) called for scholars to broaden the voices heard in crisis research, to contextualize American research, and to promote more meaningful cross-cultural work. Crisis and risk communication research needs to expand its horizons with a more global perspective that better recognizes the work, theories, and differences around the world. Such work includes crises that span boundaries, including public health outbreaks.

Multiphase Scholarship

We also pose that research needs to expand its timeline focus as the discipline continues to develop. Crises do not occur as isolated incidents in a vacuum, soon to be forgotten by those who experienced them. Risk perception is not always the result of carefully considered logic specific to each unique situation. These events are not necessarily linear, so there is a gap in understanding as to how crises proceed and take shape. In turn, future scholarship can highlight various phases, whether the preparation or recovery stage, and contribute to a stronger understanding of the nature of crises. How do our existing theories work in different stages of a crisis? Along those lines, scholarship needs to include the long-term impact of crises and further explore the influence of repeated instances. How do memory and recall of a crisis affect communication, especially surrounding protective actions, in other events? How are publics influenced in the case of frequent repeated instances, such as areas with monsoon, hurricane, or tornado seasons?

The Current Issue

With these promising research gaps in mind, we now introduce the current issue of the Journal. All five articles advance one of the

research gaps noted above: advancing 21st century risk and crisis communication challenges. First, Andrade et al. (2020) offer one of the first published articles on the government's failed response to Hurricane María in Puerto Rico, focusing on the understudied area of rumor generation. Brown-Devlin and Brown (2020) extend theory to understand how to manage sports-related crises, an understudied area that frequently challenges sports organizations and their multiple publics. Brunson et al. (2020) introduce a futuristic scenario to facilitate medical countermeasure communication. By taking on a contemporary crisis communication challenge, this article illustrates how research-based simulations can advance practice. Woods and Veil (2020) examine a legal public relations case study related to sexual misconduct, thereby providing novel insights about one of the enduring risk and crisis communication challenges of our time. We hope that you enjoy reading the articles in this issue, and that they inspire you to submit your own research to the Journal.

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